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The Questionable Historicity of the Mahabharata

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The Questionable Historicity of the Mahabharata

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It is not uncommon in mythology to create elaborate stories around historic heroic figures to elevate them to the level of gods who have time and again formed the basis for the development of religious sects. In Hindu mythology the scene is slightly different where popular stories have been woven around Vedic themes that had nothing to do with history. Typical is the example of ‘the three strides of Viṣṇu’ mentioned at about a dozen places in Ṛgveda (RV), which in the post-Vedic period was evolved into the ‘Vāmana’ (dwarf) incarnation of Viṣṇu, with the original Vedic theme having been forgotten subsequently. The great Epic story “Mahābhārata” (Mbh) which has influenced the life and culture in the Indian subcontinent for over 2200 years is probably another such example. So far all archeological excavations (Ghosh, 1989), at some of the important places mentioned in the Epic have yielded nothing, which can corroborate the story. However, most textbooks on Indian history date the Epic around 950 BC. The recent discovery of large ruined cities belonging to probably ‘the Harappan civilization’¹, (1900-3000 BC) along the bed of the now dried up Ghaggar River, and a submerged site (believed to be ~1500 BC) at Dvārakā, off the coast of Gujarat by S. R. Rao (1999), has encouraged many scholars to push Mbh to greater antiquity².

From early literature it appears that the story of Mbh was known to people by 450-600 BC (Benjamin, 1984; Brockington 2000). In Vedic literature³ (which mostly is prior to ~ 400BC), are found names such as Parīkṣit, Śantanu, Devāpi and Janamejaya which are also names of characters in Mbh. But the mere mention of such names cannot authenticate Mbh, as many persons with similar names abound Hindu mythology. There is also the mention of Vyāsa Parāśara (to whom tradition ascribes the Epic to), as the arranger of Vedas (cf. Sullivan, 1999); but not the names of Pāṇḍavas, the Epic hero Kṛṣṇa⁴, Hastināpura or Indraprastha. However, it seems unlikely that an Epic of such great proportions was the result of pure imagination of mind. Since the entire Epic revolved around a great war, there is a possibility that the Epic is actually an exaggerated version of a small battle, which may have taken place during the Vedic period.

In this context, of the many battles mentioned in RV³, ‘The battle of ten kings’ (btk) described in RV [VII.18,19, 83] is extremely interesting. It was a battle

¹ Kenoyer, 1998; it is believed that the Harappan (or Indus) civilization was pre-Āryan.

² The reader may consult Witzel, 2001; 2002; Romila Thapar, 1996; Tripathy, 1996.

³ Macdonell and Keith; 1995.

⁴ See Benzamin, 1984; for details of the occurrence of the name ‘Kṛṣṇa’ in vedic mythology.

between a Bharata king named Sudās aided by a clan named Tr̥tsus, and a confederation of ten tribes. The ten tribes pitted against Sudās consisted of five Āryan tribes along with five other non-Āryan tribes. The battle took place on the river Paruṣṇī (now Ravi). Sudās was led by Vedic Ṛṣi, Vasiṣṭa. Going by the numbers it should have been an uneven battle. But because of a timely storm and floods, and because of the strategy adopted by Vasiṣṭa, the battle was won by Sudās. Most of the opponents were either killed or washed away in the floods. It was in fact a mini-Bhārata battle! For this victory, Vasiṣṭa praises the Vedic gods, Indra and his companions in several hymns. The way the battle was described in RV gives us an impression that it has some historical value. It is, therefore, unlikely that such an important battle was not discussed at all in the later Purāṇas.

A critical comparison of btk and Mbh revealed a large number of similarities leading to the conclusion that the former may have formed the ‘nucleus’ of story of Mbh. Some of these similarities are presented below. Another intriguing feature one comes across is the abundance of the number ‘five’ throughout Mbh, which, too, is detailed below. In the following discussion the familiarity of the reader with the Epic story, is assumed.

Obsession for the number ‘five’ in Mbh:

The first thing that I have observed in Mbh⁵ is the occurrence of the number ‘five’ at many places, in not less than 81 different contexts, and a few hundred times in total (see Appendix. I). It is clearly apparent that the composer(s) has/have been obsessed with the number ‘five’, and had tried to insert it in the story where ever and however possible with, of course some theme in the background.

One can trace this obsession to the Vedas where it occurs about 100 times and in about 24 different contexts (pl. see, Appendix.II). Therefore, the composer must have seen some sacredness in that number. The obsession could even be spiritual in nature, as many a time the number was used in a spiritual context, for example: five Prāṇas, five indriyas and five senses etc. So much is the obsession of the composer(s) that we see an extra effort or anxiety on the his/their part to makeup the numbers to five or multiples of five even when there was no necessity, as in the context of the number of arrows used in the Draupadī svayaṁvara and in the discussion of the size of the ‘discus’ of Kṛṣṇa etc. (Appendix-I)⁶. Such an obsession was not found in the portions of Mbh which are believed to be later additions as discussed by Winternitz (1996), like: Bhagavadgīta,

⁵ The citation shown in the brackets throughout the present article refers to Mbh (Ganguly, 2000), along with the page number, unless specified otherwise.

⁶ It is interesting to analyze the idea of Yudhiṣṭhira asking for five villages as a compromise to avoid war with Kauravas. It is not that he wanted to give one each to the Pāṇḍavas, as the eldest among the Pāṇḍavas he would, anyway be the ultimate king of all the villages as was the case at the end of the war. It is because of the obsession or fascination of the composer to the number ‘five’. This point can also be seen in Yudhiṣṭhira asking for Kuśāsthali, Vṛkāsthali, Mākundi, Vāraṇavata + ‘any’ one village; the four villages named were the ones his allies had lost to the Kauravas long before the Mbh war: it is a shrewd political strategy to keep his allies happy. The last village is for the composer himself to make-up for the number ‘five’!

Chapters 12 & 13 and the other portions, indicating that this obsession was not a later modification of the Epic⁷.

It is interesting to see that throughout the Epic, in the battle scenes warriors are described as hitting each other with five arrows; or with five, and with ten arrows at a different warrior. For example:

“...Yuyutsa deprived of his senses by wrath, struck Ulūka with five shafts in the centre of the chest” [VIII.25,55].

“...then that rākṣasa (Ghaṭotkaca) of immeasurable soul excited with rage, sped at Bhūriśravas five and ten shafts” [VI.94,231].

“.....Arjuna, pierced by that mighty car-warrior king Śaṭṛntāpa pierced the latter in return with five and then slew his car-driver with ten shafts,..” [IV.54,92].

There are many instances of this kind throughout the battle scenes of Mbh (also, see Appendix I) and the number some times vary from, a combination of five and ten to, five and twenty. Interestingly, this kind of description can be traced to a verse in AV [VII.7.28] which reads:

“From the five-arrowed, from the ten-arrowed have I delivered thee, freed thee from Yama’s fetter and from all offence against the gods” -{Griffith’s translation, 1999}.

This verse is part of a hymn which extols the excellence of medicinal herbs, is an incantation designed to restore a sick man to health. The same verse in the translation of Devi Chand (1981), reads:

“I have delivered thee from the sufferings of five breaths (Prāṇas), from the sufferings of ten organs. ...”. A similar yogā philosophy can be seen in some parts of Mbh like, “...these persons freed from these seven and ten attributes, (viz. the five senses of knowledge, the five senses of action, the five vital breaths, mind and understanding), who have cast off all acts, and are divested of the five and ten elements which constitute the gross body, are said to emancipate” [XII.336,117].

From this discussion, it is clear that the composer was more concerned about the spiritual aspect and hence, we have to seriously doubt the historicity of the matter presented in the Epic. If one looks at Appendix I, most of the kings mentioned have five children each! This cannot be a mere coincidence. This gives rise to the same suspicion about Pāṇḍavas as well as the number five is mostly associated with them either directly or indirectly, and at many places in the Epic, they were compared to five indriyas, meaning the five senses. I strongly believe that the composer was bent on creating five characters in the name of Pāṇḍavas while dramatizing the btk, the details of which are given below.

Dramatization of btk to Mbh:

On close comparison of btk & Mbh, it becomes quite clear that a one to one mapping of the characters can be done as:

(i). Sudās, a Bharata king = Yudhiṣṭhira, another Bharata king, son of Dharma, eldest among the Pāṇḍavas;

⁷ This number continues to play a role in the other areas of Indian mythology, art and culture: Pañcamukha-Gaṇeṣa, Pañcamukha-Āñjaneya, Pañcāṅga, and so on.

(ii). Vasiṣṭa, chief priest of Sudās = Vyāsa, descendant of Vasiṣṭa, chief priest of Pāṇḍavas;

(iii). Indra, chief Vedic god of battles = Arjuna, son of Indra, the chief fighter among the Pāṇḍavas;

(iv). Maruts, close companions of Indra in the Vedic battles = Bhīma, son of Maruts, the strongest among the Pāṇḍavas;

(v). Twin Aśvins, companions of Indra = the twins: Nakula + Sahadeva, sons of Aśvins; and importantly,

(vi). Varuṇa, lord of waters, Indra's companion = Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's companion.

This may be compared to the standard list of incarnations of Pāṇḍavas mentioned in Mbh (I.1,2; 63,129; 67,143; 95,205) as:

Yudhiṣṭhira from Dharma; Bhīma from Vāyu (or Maruts, at some places in the list of references given above); Arjuna from Indra; and Nakula & Sahadeva from Aśvins.

The justification for the mapping is given below. In this context, it should be kept in mind that the Vedic gods are all natural forces and hence, are formless (nirākāra). When one wishes to portray them in a human-form the basic characters have to be preserved: this is exactly what was done in the composition of Mbh. Vyāsa played the role of Vasiṣṭa, and had guided Pāṇḍavas throughout the Epic, the way Vasiṣṭa did in the case of Sudās. Vyāsa was also the chief priest of Pāṇḍavas at the Rājasūya- and Aśvamedha- Yāgas.

(i) **Yudhiṣṭhira** (meaning⁸ one who is firm in a battle).

His other name is 'King Dharma', and he is often addressed as 'the son of Dharma' in the Epic. Dharma (the god of justice) is mentioned only once in a verse of RV addressed to the Aśvins as:

“With Mitra, Varuṇa, Dharma, and the Maruts in your company approach unto your praiser's call...” [RV.VIII.35.13].

During the time of the RV, Yama is different from Dharma, and is basically a 'king' of the departed⁹. Agni is the friend of Yama and in RV.1.164.46, Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan are mentioned as the names of the one being. Yama is also mentioned in enumerations of gods including Agni⁸. However, during the time of Mbh he was already identified with Dharma, which can be seen from following;

“The Yama possessed of great intelligence and fully conversant with virtue...” [III.41,92.

According to some Indian philosophers, the post-Vedic Yama is a purifying Agni. He is often addressed as 'King Yama-Dharma', which implies a fusion of two different characters. In this context, it is interesting to analyze the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, from the following quotes from Mbh.

⁸Apte, 1998.

⁹ Macdonell, 1997.

Drupada addressing Yudhiṣṭhira says, “O son of Kuntī, as thou art pure and acquainted with the rules of morality, ...” and in reply to that Yudhiṣṭhira says, “My tongue never uttered an untruth. My heart also never turneth to what is sinful....” [I.197].388.

In reply to the question of Yudhiṣṭhira (in disguise) to Kṛṣṇa as to how he could recognize him, Kṛṣṇa says, “Fire, even if it is covered can be known” [I.193,382]. Dhṛtarāṣṭra comments, “King Yudhiṣṭhira who is like a flame of fire, has been deceived by me” [V.36,75].

Sañjaya comments, “As a blazing fire burning all around consumeth dry grass in the hot season, so will Yudhiṣṭhira, inflamed with wrath, consume the Dhṛtarāṣṭra host by glance alone of his eye” [V.48,111].

It is often said, “Yudhiṣṭhira is self-restraint unto himself” [eg., V.50,122]. In the context of the 7th day of the battle in his fight against a king named Śṛtāyus, Sañjaya describes, “...thereupon, Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, blazed up with wrath, like the fire that blazeth forth at the end of the yuga for consuming creatures. Beholding the son of Pāṇḍu excited with rage, the gods, the Gandharvas, and the rākṣasas trembled, O king, the universe became agitated. Yudhiṣṭhira assumed a terrible expression like the Sun that riseth at the end of the yuga...” [VI.85,209].

The above quotes clearly testify his character as purifying Agni, which is the characteristic of post Vedic Yama (Dharma).

A similar comparison has been made of Sudās by Vasiṣṭa in hymns RV.VII.6, 5-7, where he has been described as Agni Vaiśvānara, the fire as the universal man or world ruler. This character of Yudhiṣṭhira, exactly fits to the character of the ‘sage king’ Sudās. Both are Bharatas and it is interesting to see that even Agni is referred to as ‘Agnibhārata’ [RV. IV.25.4]. Sudās is a ‘sage-king’ and according to tradition he has a hymn in RV [X.133] to his credit and was praised for his character by Vasiṣṭa in several hymns in RV.

(ii) **Arjuna** (meaning⁸ white / bright / of the colour of the day [RV.VI.9.1]).

He is said to be ‘aindri’, son of Indra throughout the Mbh. He has many similarities with Indra. The term ‘Arjuna’ is a pseudonym⁷ of Indra in one of the Brāhmaṇas (cf. Winternitz, 1996). In the RV, Indra is a warrior god. In the Mbh, Arjuna is a brave warrior and in fact, throughout the Epic story he had been fighting battles. He is the chief warrior of the Pāṇḍavas. He along with his brother Bhīma (like Indra aided by his close companions, the Maruts), is solely responsible for winning the battles for the Pāṇḍavas. He killed many mighty warriors in the battle of Mbh. Throughout RV, the horses of Indra are said to be tawny (hari) in colour, with golden manes [RV. X.96; VII.37.4,5] and elsewhere [AV. XX.128.15,16] his horse is said to be Ucchaisravas (‘glorious’). In Mbh [IV.44.76], Arjuna is referred to as ‘Śvetavāhana’, because when battling with foe, white horses decked in golden armour, are always yoked unto his chariot. Elsewhere [BG. 1.14,15], Arjuna’s horses are said to be like Ucchaisravas of Indra. His conch named Devadatta (meaning⁷ ‘god-given’) was in fact the one used by Indra [III.167,342] and his chariot has a flag depicting ‘Māruti’ (derived from the word ‘Marut’, the close companions of Indra in battles). The use of Indra’s chariot by Arjuna and his comparison to Indra during the war with the demons Nivāta-Kavacas [III.168-170] is clearly an effort

by the composer to project him as Indra in the Epic [also see foot note¹⁰]. Throughout the Epic story, Indra had been assisting Arjuna either directly or indirectly, and was guarding him all the time.

(iii) **Bhīma** (meaning⁸ ‘terrible’).

In the Epic, he was said to be born of Maruts (identified as the god of wind or Vāyu [I.63,129; I.1,6] ¹¹). In the RV, the Maruts are wind gods and are regarded as the offspring of Rudra and are often invoked together. Vedic Rudra is associated with wind, very strong, but is a terrifying god and some these qualities are inherited by the Maruts. They are described in RV [VII.58.2 and V.56.3] as terrible (‘bhīm’) ⁸, fierce, irascible and they are also said to have the brilliance of Agni⁸. They rend trees and like wild elephants devour the forests. The character of Bhīma is very similar throughout the Epic. He was a terror to the Kaurava brothers since their childhood days and in the end he alone kills all of them. His several exploits in which he showed his extraordinary strength, his fearful vows against the Kauravas especially against Duṣṣāsana, the fulfilment of that vow by drinking the blood of Duṣṣāsana and his use of trees by uprooting them, against the Kīcakas are clear testimony of his association with the Maruts. It is also interesting to note that Indra is often addressed in the RV along with Maruts as are Bhīmarjunas in Mbh.

(iv) **Nakula & Sahadeva** (NS):

These two are often addressed as a pair in Mbh and the way the two Aśvins are invoked in the RV. In fact, the internal evidence of the Mbh itself testifies that they are born to the Aśvins. (Interestingly, the two Aśvins have a common wife named Uṣas, the dawn). The Aśvins are the physicians of gods and are closely associated with Sūrya. They may very well be stars identified with the morning and evening¹². The Aśvins are twins and so are NS. The Aśvins are said to be the youngest of the gods, so are NS among the Pāṇḍavas. The Aśvins are said to be beautiful and so are NS [I.124,260]. The Aśvins possess profound wisdom as are NS [III.268,525], and this character is particularly true with Sahadeva. On the 7th day of the war, both NS were described to have fought king Śalya, using a single chariot [VIII.24,53]. Interestingly both the Aśvins use a single chariot in RV. The skills attributed to NS in training and treating horses and cows [III.51,109] have their origin in many verses of RV and as an example, two verses addressed to the Aśvins are quoted below:

“...Let us invoke you rich in steeds and cattle: by day and night keep far from us the arrow” [RV.VII.71.1].

“...Who further friendship with their noble natures, combining wealth in kine with wealth in horses” [RV.VII.67.9].

¹⁰ Indra has many wives: apart from his RV consort Indrāṇī, and regular wives such as Prāśa & Séna; he has an āsura woman also as his consort [Parameswaranand, 2002]. It is interesting to see that Arjuna too has a total of four wives: Draupadi, Subhadra, Citrāṅgadā and a non-Aryan woman of the Nāga tribe named Ulūpi.

¹¹ Many scholars of India feel that Maruts are Vāyu of the post-Vedic period. The fusion of these two gods into one might have taken place during the time of the composition of Mbh as testified by Mbh itself.

¹² The exact nature of the Aśvins in the RV is not clearly understood.

The Aśvins have no role to play in btk, so is the case with NS in the war of Mbh. It appears to me that they are included among the Pāṇḍavas to make-up for the number ‘five’.

(v) **Kṛṣṇa:**

In btk, water played a major role in clinching the battle for Sudās. Many enemies were drowned. The presiding deity of water is Varuṇa. The Vasiṣṭas have a special relationship with Varuṇa, as their ancestor Vasiṣṭa Maitrāvaruṇī is said to be born to Urvaśī and Mitṛā - Varuṇa [RV.VII.33,11-13]. The Vasiṣṭas have many hymns to Varuṇa, Viṣṇu and Indra - Varuṇa (jointly). Varuṇa is an important deity in RV, but Viṣṇu is a lesser god to Indra, but both out grow in stature in the post-Vedic period. The trend started during Vasiṣṭa’s time itself as can be seen from the hymns RV.VII.40.5 and 49.3; where it is said that “all the gods are born of Viṣṇu” and Varuṇa is said to be “the lord of waters”. The relationship between Varuṇa and Viṣṇu via Prajāpati, was very well described by Coomaraswamy (2001), through what he termed as ‘water cosmology’. He said “Varuṇa was originally the root of the tree of life, the source of all creation (RV. I.24.7), and it is presumably still Varuṇa who is called the unborn in RV. I.24.7, ... a great ‘Yakṣa’ reclining in tāpas upon the back of waters in AV. X.7.38, where the tree springs from his navel; though this formula is soon inherited by Prajāpati, (Yajurveda V.6.4) and then by Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) who retains it to this day”. Thus, one can see a close correspondence between Varuṇa and Viṣṇu of the later mythology. In the Bhagavadgīta (BG), Lord Kṛṣṇa says, "I am Viṣṇu among the sons of Aditi ... (10.21); I am Varuṇa among the water gods.... (10.29); I am the vital essence (rasa) in the water... (7.8); it is I that as ‘Soma’ very self of rasa nourish all plants (15.13)." Although the BG is a later addition to the Mbh, it clearly supports the theme that Varuṇa can be identified with Kṛṣṇa of the Mbh via the “water cosmology”¹³. It is also interesting to note that the divine dominion of Varuṇa (and Mitra) is often referred to with the word ‘Māyā’^{9,14}.

Thus, we see that one way of attributing divinity to a character in the Epic is to project them as born of an aquatic animal, a river goddess or an apsaras (the celestial nymph who symbolizes the waters of heaven). (The association of Pāṇḍavas with the matsya kingdom during their ajñātavāsā and the theme of matsya-yantra are pointers to this philosophy). The depiction of aquatic animals in the Buddhist and Hindu architecture is also based on this philosophy. The Mbh characters said to have born in the above fashion were king Virāṭa, Matsyagandhī, Vyāsa, Bhīṣma, Drupada, Drōṇa, and Draupadī & Duṣṭadyumna (the latter two are said to be born of fire). The composer is trying to tell us to treat these characters as divine. So, is the case with Pāṇḍavas who are conceived as Vedic gods in

¹³ The birth of Kṛṣṇa is not described in the Epic, he was simply referred to as Vāsudeva, Devakīputra as in Cāndogya Upaniṣad. The Pāṇḍavas first meeting with him was during the Draupadī svayaṁvara, where Kṛṣṇa had to introduce himself to Yudhiṣṭhira as “Kṛṣṇa” [I.193,381]. Can we treat him as the unborn as in RV.I.24.7? Also see Mbh. I.2,20; 63,128; V.70,152, where his birth was said to be extraordinary.

¹⁴ In this context, I wish to bring it to the notice of the reader that, throughout the Epic, Vyāsa has a peculiar relationship with Kṛṣṇa: both appear and disappear mysteriously and always know each other’s mind very well; and are in constant touch with each other regarding the welfare of Pāṇḍavas. If we go by the Buddhist version, as depicted in the Jātaka tales, both die almost at the same time, which was not given in the hindū version of the story (cf. Sullivan, 1999). Interestingly, both have the same name ‘Kṛṣṇa’.

the Epic. Note that all the divine characters are siding with the Pāṇḍavas either directly or indirectly. In essence, the battle is between divinity vs demonic forces.

Other important points:

(i). The following verse of Vasiṣṭa addressed to the Aśvins is interesting.

“...’Twist you and us there is ancestral friendship and common kin: remember and regard it” [RV.VII.72.2].

In the RV, the Aśvins and Varuṇa are said to be the sons of Vaivāsvat, and the senior Vasiṣṭa is said to be born of Mitra-Varuṇa, and hence, the Vasiṣṭas, Varuṇa and the Aśvins are all related to each other. A relationship, if not exactly similar, can also be seen in the Epic among the twins NS, Vyāsa (who is also a Vāsiṣṭa, and is also the grandfather of both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas) and Kṛṣṇa (through Kuntī). It is also interesting to see in this context that in the RV, even Yama is said to be born of Vaivāsvat, and Agni is said to be Indra’s twin brother. And elsewhere [RV.1.170.2], the Maruts are called the brothers of Indra. Thus, the relationship existing among the Ṛgvedic gods is also preserved to some extent among the Pāṇḍavas in the dramatization of the theme of btk.

(ii). The battle btk should have been an uneven battle as it was between a small Ṛtsu - Bharata clan against many tribes, which is very clear from the following verse of the Vasiṣṭa, “E’en with weak he wrought this matchless exploit: e’en with a goat he did to death a lion. He pared the pillar’s angles with a needle. Thus to Sudās Indra gave all provisions” [RV.VII.18.17]. Similar is the situation with Yudhiṣṭhira where he has no army of his own and the opponents in the form of Kauravas are huge in numbers, backed up by unrivalled warriors like Bhīṣma and Dróṇa. In both the cases, it is because of the help from Indra and his companions that the battles have been won.

(iii). In Appendix III, I have given the details of the tribes or kingdoms involved in the both the battles, i.e. btk and Mbh¹⁵. It is interesting to see that the battle lines in Mbh are drawn on the same theme as in the case of btk. So striking is the appearance of the tribes: the Vaikarṇas, and the offshoot of the Āryan tribes, that had fought against Sudās in btk, on the side of the Kauravas, that the Mbh battle looks like a replay of the old Bhārata battle, i.e. btk. (Interestingly, the entire Vṛṣṇi tribe, to which Kṛṣṇa is said to belong, fought by the side of Kauravas; except for Kṛṣṇa and Sātyaki, who sided with the Pāṇḍavas for reasons of personal closeness with Arjuna, with Baladeva taking a neutral stand).

(iv). It is interesting to note that the Śṛṅjayas who were allies of the Ṛtsus during Ṛgvedic times, are prominently mentioned in the battle of Mbh even though they had merged with the Kuru-Pāñcālas during the post-Vedic period. So is the case of Vaikarṇas. It is also interesting to see the use of the term ‘bharata’ exclusively of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas after their ancestors, although there are many other tribes in the Kuru-Pāñcāla

¹⁵ Based on the information given in Macdonell & Keith, 1995; Parameswaranand, 2002 and Majumdar et al.1996.

clan (believed to have emerged from a merger of the Krivis, Bharatas and Śṛṅjayas into the Pūru / Kuru tribe during the post-RV era)¹⁶.

I conclude by saying that the Epic Mbh, is a dramatized version of the btk and there is no historicity involved in the Epic. There is only one 'bhārata war' ie., the Vedic battle of ten kings. It is believed here that this communication would start an interesting debate in the study of the ancient history of India.

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Appendix.I. References to 'five' in Mbh:

S.No	Context	Ref. to Mbh
1	Pāṇḍavas are five.	
2	Upa-Pāṇḍavas (i.e. born to Draupadī from Pāṇḍavas) are five	I.223,432.
3	Śyamantapañcaka (Kurukṣetra): It is the land of five lakes of blood.	III.117,251.
4	Total number of Vedas are five; with Mbh as the 5 th Veda.	I.2, 15; 63,128.
5	Students of Vyāsa are five; with Śūka (his own son as his 5 th student)	I.1,6;63,128 ; II.4,6
6	Śūka is said to be incarnation of Pañcabhūtas (ie. five elements: water, fire, earth, ether and wind)	XII.324,82.
7	Total number of persons referred to as Kṛṣṇa are five in number: (i). Kṛṣṇa (Vāsudeva); (ii) Kṛṣṇa (Dvaipāyana Vyāsa); (iii) Kṛṣṇa (Draupadī); (iv) Kṛṣṇa (Arjuna: one of the ten epithets used for Arjuna); and (v) duplicate Kṛṣṇa (Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva)(?).	IV.44,76. V.49,119; 52,176; 59.139. VIII.17,36, I.14,33.
8	Kuntī's sisters are five ¹⁶ .	
9	Kekaya brothers are five - this occurs many times in the Epic.	V.19,32; 51.122
10	Suśarman brothers (of Trigarta) are five.	V.167,324.
11	Virāṭa's children are five (including Uttara).	
12	Rukmiṇī has five brothers ¹⁶ .	
13	Manuvu (s/o Bharata) has five sons ¹⁶ .	
14	King Yayāti has five sons.	I.75,165.
15	Ayus (s/o king Purūrava) has five sons ¹⁶ .	
16	Sage Jamadagni has five sons, last of whom is Bhārgava Rāma.	III.116,249.
17	King Vāsu-Uparicara has five sons.	I.63,125.
18	King Haryaśva has five sons ¹⁶ (also, pl. see Garrett, 1999).	

¹⁶ Also see, Witzel (1995).

19	Pāñcālas are of five tribes (cf. Garrett, 1999).	
20	Pāñcālas are said to have five great qualities ¹⁶ .	
21	Draupadī is referred as one of the (five) Pañcakanyas.	I.199,392; V.33,65.
22	Pāñḍavas are said to be five Indras and there is a story of five Indras.	„
23	A story involving Arjuna and five apsarasas.	I.218,422.
24	The same story also refers to five lakes.	I.218,422.
25	Svayaṁvara is said to be the 5 th form of choosing a bridegroom for marriage.	I.102,219.
26	Arjuna spends five years in the abode of Indra.	II.44,99; IV.2,3.
27	Arjuna gets celestial weapons from five gods: (Indra, Varuṇa, Kubera, Rudra and Yama).	II.36,80; 170,330.
28	Arjuna is said to have spent five years, a life of brahmacarya, on Himavant.	IV.49,85.
29	The region of Niṣādhas is said to be the region of five rivers (Punjab?).	III.34,76.
30	The conch of Kṛṣṇa is Pāñcajanya (also pl. see entry 3 in Appdx.II).	I.65,133; II.20,44.
31	The standard (chariot flag) of Bhīṣma bears five stars.	IV.55,96; VI.17,39.
32	The number of villages asked by Yudhiṣṭhira as a compromise to avoid war is five. (Also, see the footnote 5).	V.31,56; 55,130.
33	The number of arrows used at the svayaṁvara of Draupadī is five.	I.188,372; 190,376.
34	Often a set of five arrows is used in fights or wars throughout Mbh -this occurs at least at a few hundred places.	I.102,220;118, 245; VI.47,113.
35	Often we see five car-warriors as a set, fighting the opponents -this occurs at least a few tens of times.	IV.32,58; I.47,113.
36	Reference to Pañcajana.	VII.11,23.
37	The discus of Kṛṣṇa is said to occupy five cubits of space.	V.68,149.
38	King Tāmra has five daughters.	I.66,138.
39	The camps are said to have been laid at a distance of five Yōjanas from the scene of the battle.	V.198,375.
40	The princes of Gāndhāra are five in number.	I.188,372; V.6,15.
41	Five is the number of the wives of Kṛṣṇa who are said to have committed ‘sāfi’ on the funeral pyre of Kṛṣṇa.	XVI.7,14.
42	Reference to the country of five rivers. -this occurs for about not less than ten times.	II.31,67; 82,171; V.4,6; 19,32.etc.
43	The Kauravas fight the battle for five days under the leadership of Dróṇa and for ten (5+5) days under Bhīṣma.	I.2,16.
44	Reference to five Varṣas of the middle region.	VI.6,15.

45	Pāṇḍavas have another set of five sons through their second wives (plus one named Ghaṭotkaca from Hidim̐ba by Bhīma).	I.95,205.
46	Reference to comparison of Pāṇḍavas to five Suns.	IV.51,88.
47	The Rākṣasa Hiraṇyakaśipu had five sons; the eldest among them is Prahlāda.	I.65,13.
48	'Lying' is said to be excusable on five occasions.	I.82,180.
49	King Ilīna (grand father of Bharata) has five sons who are said to be equal in might unto the five elements.	I.94,200; 95,203.
50	The king Kuru had five sons to his wife Vāhinī.	I.94,201.
51	The Ṛṣi Kākṣivat had five children to queen Sudeṣṇa (Aṅga, Vaṅga Kaḷiṅga, Pundra and Suhma).	I.104,226.
52	Reference to Pāṇḍavas as an embodied period of five years.	I.124,261.
53	Drōṇa surrounded by five Pāṇḍavas is compared to Moon in conjunction with the five-starred constellation Hastā.	I.137,287.
54	Reference to five regions.	I.218,422; 219,424.
55	Reference to five great sacrifices by king Śvetaki.	I.225,435.
56	Reference to five large hills near Magadha.	II.21.45.
57	Reference to five countries.	II.26,57.
58	Reference to five tribes of Kārṇatas.	II.31,66.
59	Reference to five elements - this occurs many times.	II.37,78; 50,109.
60	Pāṇḍavas stay at Kām̐yaka forest for five years.	II.50,109.
61	Comparison of arm to five headed snake -- this occurs a few times.	II.57,121; IV.22,42.
62	Five persons alike in appearance at the svayam̐vara of Damayantī.	II.57,121.
63	Reference to Purāṇas as the 5 th Veda.	II.58,123.
64	The width of a river is said to be five Yōjanas.	II.58,172.
65	Sage Vandin says, "five is the number of fires, five are the feet of the metre called Paṅkti, five are the sacrifices; five locks, it is said in the Vedas, are on the heads of the apsaras, and five sacred rivers are known in the world".	III.134,277.
66	Reference to five tufts on the heads of Jayadratha.	III.257,529.
67	Sage Pulastya through his three wives had five children.	III.258,534.
68	Five epithets for goddess Lakṣmī: Bhūti, Hrī, Śrī, Kīrti and Kāntī (feminine embodiments of prosperity, modesty, beauty, fame and loveliness).	IV.14,24.
69	Five fires.	V.33,62.
70	Five senses - this occurs at quite a few places.	V.34.66; VI.39,89.
71	Five inner foes of mental origin.	V.34,67.
72	Men are said to have five different kinds of strength.	V.37,80.
73	The five Pāṇḍavas are said to be the five elements of the universe in their subtle form upholding all mobile and	V.65,146.

	immobile things.	
74	The height of a region is said to be five Yójanas.	XIV.58,105.
75	Truth is said to be possessed of five indications.	XIV.35,60.
76	Reference to five sacrificing priests and five Prāṇas (or life breaths).	XIV.20,17.
77	Sage Śukra (Uṣanas) has five children.	I.65,134.
78	Reference to five in Sāṃkhya yogá.	XII.306,20.
79	Reference to five organs of knowledge, and five organs of action.	XII.303,11.
80	The space is said to have five properties.	XII.302,1.
81	Slaying of a set of five warriors at a time.	VIII.48,119.

¹⁶ This information is taken from Mahābhāgavata.

Appendix II. Reference to the number 'five' in the Vedas:

	Context	Reference
1	Pañcājanaḥ, Pañca mānavaḥ, Pañca manuṣaḥ, Pañca kṛṣṭayaḥ, Pañca kṣitīḥ, Pañca carṣaṇayaḥ, Pañca jātaḥ ---- These terms occur in the Vedas for not less than about 50 times. The meaning of Pañcājanaḥ is given as: (i). five people; (ii) gods, men, Gandharvas and apsarasas, snakes and the fathers; (iii) four varnas + Niṣadhas as the fifth; (iv) five Āryan tribes: Anus, Druhyus, Yadus, Turvaṣass and Pūrus; (iv) five births of men, five worlds of creatures.	RV.VII.72.5; 73.5; 74.4. etc.
2	Pañcājātaḥ: five tribes on the river Sarasvatī.	RV.VI.61.12; X.53.4.
3	Indra is 'Pāñcājanyāḥ'	RV.V.32.11
4	Pañca indriyas—occurs once in AV.	RV.V.32.11, IV.34.11.
5	Five Adhvaryus.	RV.III.7.7; V.42.1
6	Five footed sire (five seasons?) -occurs once in AV.	RV.I.164.12.
7	Five fold beings (all living beings) -occurs twice in YV.	RV.VII.69.2.
8	Five spoked wheel (five seasons?) - twice in AV and once in YV.	RV.I.164.12.
9	Five regions of the world - once in AV.	RV.IX.86.29.
10	Five lands.	RV.X.181.3.
11	Five paces or five stages or five elements of sacrifice: grain, soma, the kine, one Puroḍāśa cake + clarified butter	RV.X.13.3.
12	Five kindered companies.	RV.IX.14.2.
13	Five fold gift: offering of grain, gruel, curdled milk, rice cake and curds.	RV.I.40.3.
14	Five arrowed.	AV.VII.7.28.

15	Five healing herbs --- indirectly once in AV.	
16	Pañkti: (i) consisting of five pādas or divisions; (ii) man: composed of five parts hair, skin, flesh, bones and marrow — occurs three times in AV and nine times in YV.	AV.XII.3.10.
17	Five horsed car of the Sun ----- once in AV.	AV.X.8.8
18	Pañcaudana: offering with five fold mess or messes -18 times in the same hymn in AV.	AV.IX.5.8-37.
19	Pañcacūdas: five-crested bricks- once in YV.	
20	Five fold life - once in YV.	
21	Five fold man, rice - once each in AV and YV.	
22	Five fingers.	YV.I.9.
23	Five sheaths or kosās: the soul is encased in the body composed of five frames or sheaths --- four times in SV.	
24	Five elements and arts - four times in SV.	SV [†] .
25	Five sons of man	AV.III.21.5

[†] Sāmaveda (SV): Ayendra kāṇḍa.IV.4; Araṇyak kāṇḍa.II.2.

APPENDIX. III

Table.I. Details of the kingdoms involved in btk*

Allies of Sudās	Confederation of ten tribes
(i). Bharatas (Krivis?) (ii). Tṛtsus (iii). Śṛṅjayas	Pūru, Druhyu, Anu, Turvāṣas, Yadu - (five Aryan tribes) ; Bhṛguṣ, two Vaikarṇas, Pakthas, Alinas, Bhalānas, Viṣāṇins and Śivas.

*The role of matsyas is not at all clear. According to Macdonell & Keith, this tribe didn't exist during the Ṛgvedic time and the confusion is because of mistranslation of the particular verse RV.VII.18.6. Likewise, the role of Viśvāmitra is also not clear because he was not mentioned in the actual battle hymns.

Table.II. Kingdoms involved in the battle of Mbh [VI.19, 31][†]

Allies of Pāṇḍavas	Allies of Kauravas
Pāñcālas, Śṛṅjayas, Matsyas, Cedis, Pāṇḍyas, plus the two persons named Sātyaki and Kṛṣṇa (with their armies on the side of Kauravas).	(i). Kurus, Bālhikas (offshoot of Pūrus); (ii). Haihayas, Vṛṣṇi, Andhakas, Avantis, Kukuras (offshoot of Yadus); (iii). Aṅgas, Kaḷiṅgas, Madras, Sauvīras, Kambojas, Sindhus, Gāndhāras (offshoot of Anus); (iv). Bhojas (offshoot of Druhyus?); (v). Yavanas [VI.20, 45], (offshoot of Turvāṣas?); (vi). Mlecchas (offshoot of Anu?); (vii). The Vaikarṇas [VI.51, 128];

†According to Mbh {I.85, 186], the sons or the descendants of Yadu are known by the name of the Yādavas; while those of Turvāṣas have come to be called the Yavanas; the descendants of Druhyu are Bhojas while those of Anu are the Mlecchas and the Pūru are the Pauravas.

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